Analysis of Political Instability

A Generic Outline of Theory and Indicators

John F. McCreary

Introduction

Every reasonably competent country analyst knows whether and which of his countries are unstable. Usually he can state the reasons. But identifying unstable countries is fairly easy. The hard questions are those posed by our national security customers. How unstable is it and will instability lead to violence? Will violence lead to a change of government? Will the US need to conduct an evacuation of noncombatants? When? Above all, how much time do we have before violence occurs? For these questions, most analysts have no basis for a trustworthy answer.

Many academic approaches to analysis of instability are stuck on discerning and defining which countries are unstable. They search for key signs of weakness, or indicators. That approach has been useful in surfacing many nuances of state activity that expose internal weakness in specific instances. It falls far short, however, in answering the questions posed by national security officials.

Indicators alone, without some larger context that gives them meaning, have proven unreliable in predicting the degree of instability or the timing of a government overthrow or system collapse. Additionally, they are indiscriminate in providing insight as to way ahead in a breakdown process.

For example, many theorists point to various economic indices as predictors of instability. Our experience in J2 however is that indicators of economic decline are not invariable portents of political instability. In most systems that concern us, economic and social problems are chronic and have only indirect linkage to political processes. Economic and social conditions are uncertain guides in assessing both present conditions and prospective political unrest.

In J2, our theoretical research has concentrated first on mapping the phenomenology or processes of internal breakdown. This has proven the most productive technique as a guide to prediction. In defining the processes, we developed indicators tailored to the processes as they work in a country, usually derived from its past. The indicators gain importance and discriminating power as signposts of what subsystems are not working well in a state and for measuring the extent of internal decline in general or even in specific subsystems.

Our research and application of a process approach explain why economic and social conditions almost never lead directly to government overthrow or even insurgency. They may be useful, but are not necessary, and they are never sufficient causes for political collapse. Unless popular discontent transforms into a force that can stress the regime in power, economic and social unrest remain inchoate and in the background. In short, these conditions do not act alone. Leadership, organization and usually weapons are necessary and sufficient of themselves to cause violent or forcible government change.

The purpose of this essay is to explain the findings of our process-based approach and to explain for J2 analysts a reliable method for understanding and predicting the phenomenon of instability. The approach to instability applied in this paper as in other

warning guidance materials in the J2 is to understand states and other political, social, economic and military groups as living systems. This means that their behavior and their processes of expansion or decline are predictable. We think they can be best predicted in much the same way that biologists, life scientists and medical doctors measure and predict the course of disease, the effects of stress, the healing of a bone or the overall health of a living system in their fields.

The materials that follow constitute a uniform model of instability in human systems of general application. The task of the analyst is to apply this so-called "meta-model" to the specific systems that he is studying or responsible for predicting. In that sense this approach does not supplant or replace other lines of investigation. Rather, it builds on and integrates them into a single approach to the problem of instability, which has become the most common challenge to US security interests in the post-Soviet era.

This essay relies heavily on two sources. First is the seminal work, *Living Systems* by Dr. James G. Miller who first understood human political behavior as similar to comparable behavior in other living organisms. Second, the collected wisdom from 53 years of US national experience in attempting to warn of government breakdowns, coups d'etat, systems decline, insurgencies, revolutions and other internal upheavals in states or movements. US intelligence has learned important lessons that must be preserved and passed on.

Contents

Warning Concepts Summarized

Living System
The definition used in this essay is derived from Dr. James Miller's definition in, *Living Systems*. A living system is a complex open structure composed of subsystems which process inputs, throughputs, and outputs of various forms of matter, energy and information essential for life.

Threat
This term signifies the potential for damage in a foreseeable or definable time frame. Damage includes, but is not limited to, loss of life, physical damage to property, frustrations of intentions or policies and stress in systems. Damage is best understood as a measurable outcome or result, more than as a psychological condition. However, any development, condition or trend that could adversely affect US forces, persons, policies, programs, territory, property and interests, plus those of US friends and allies qualifies as a threat. The most important condition is that the damage is not actual.

The element of futurity is fundamental in all threats because it enables warning. In a foreseeable time frame is a variable term whose significance is that the damage has not yet occurred. ForJ2, for example, damage that may occur out to six months is the normal time for warning. Other intelligence organizations deal with longer range threats. Sometimes the damage is defined by contingent events that might not occur.

To the extent that US defense interests and personnel may be affected, a threat becomes a J2 intelligence responsibility.

Stress
This terms signifies the outcome or result of a system's failure to satisfy wants or needs. Stress almost always precedes other forms of actual damage. Stress becomes instability when it leads to breakdowns in the system or becomes voiced as a grievance by members of the system.

Political Instability
The condition, process and consequences of stress in a sovereign state or other governing system stemming from the system's inability or refusal to satisfy political, social, economic or security wants and needs of key components of its population. It often stems from or leads to a loss of authority or control over persons, territory or interests.

It is signaled by failure or change of policies or programs, removal of persons, and changes of government or government systems. The process need not be violent, but violent change is the concern of J2 most often because of the need for evacuation of noncombatants, but sometimes because of the need for US intervention.

Authority
The sociologist Max Weber describes this as "imperative control," the power or right to direct subordinates. In the final analysis instability is always about authority--who has it, on

what basis and how it is exercised. Decisions regarding command, control, or judgment are determined on the basis of authority, which inhibits disobedience or disorder. Legitimacy is an attribute of authority that depends on the fundamental values of a system.

Challenges to authority, or grievances, arise because the wielding entity fails to satisfy the needs or wants of a subordinate. The nature or cogency of the challenge defines the stress that leads to political instability. The failure itself may arise in the economic or social sectors.

Warning

This term signifies a process of communicating judgments about threats to to planners, operators and deciders in a time and fashion to enable them to avoid, deter or minimize the damage.

-Achieving safety is the objective of warning. This places a premium on predictive accuracy early in the development of a threat, rather than accurately predicting the outcome after time for deterrence or damage limitation measures has passed.

-Early in the development of a threat, the detailed intelligence content of a warning will always be ambiguous. Clarity comes late. Consequently, the identification of the threat process is essential for early warnings and predictions, whereas the assembly of details is important for late warning refinements and greater precision.

For both early and late threat statements, the key components are actor, nature of the action, nature of the damage, likely extent of damage, probability of occurrence, direction, duration and timing, plus options for avoiding damage. These components will change in time as the threat evolves. They will grow and intensify in the absence of effective remedial or deterrent actions.

The warning function contains numerous terms of art (strategic and tactical, actionable, warning time and so on) that J2 analysts should learn but are not essential for analysis of political instability.

Indicators

Observable specific behaviors that constitute and define a threat. A threat may include many behaviors that are ambiguous and not useful as an indicator. Indicators have four attributes: early, reliable, diagnostic and detectable.

The threat attribute of futurity plus the need for time to try to avoid damage are parts of the trait of *early*. *Early* is always scenario dependent.

Reliable means that the behavior may be relied on to occur in the developing threat under study.

Diagnostic means that the event is a defining characteristic of one and only one process, scenario or set of decisions. Many events are consistent with more than one process or set of decisions, and thus have low diagnostic powers.

Detectable means that the event can be collected by intelligence systems. A highly diagnostic event that cannot be collected is not an indicator. The fact that an event is detectable does not imply that its significance will be recognized by intelligence analysts.

The Rules of Instability Analysis

1. Whether a system is expanding or contracting, every living system is always searching for equilibrium with its environment and this creates stress. Stress is a normal condition.
2. Instability starts when stress results in a failure of the system (including its part) to satisfy a need or a want in the quest for equilibrium. Instability becomes political when the failure gives rise to a grievance and demand for redress by the members.
3. Instability always begins on the border or the political periphery.
4. Instability is always centripetal in that it always moves from the border or the political periphery to a center of power.
5. Housing, food, heating oil and cooking oil are responsible for 75% of all government overthrows.
6. Governments almost always bring themselves down.
7. The organizations with the most or best guns always decide the outcome.
8. If collapse begins, it progresses in a sequence of three movements: underreaction, overreaction and concession. Collapse is not inevitable.
9. All governments will collapse inward by seeking a line—a set of defendable boundaries and sustainable services-they can hold to prevent collapse.
10. All governments resort to blame to try to halt the collapse at the lowest costs possible.
11. Power sharing is a period of quiet, but it is always unstable and temporary. It is preceded and followed by violence. Violence is the sign that the system is close to a power sharing arrangement or that a party to the power sharing arrangement is attempting to breakout.

Instability Theory

Basics

The basic process

All living systems have processes that govern health and illness. Both create stress in the system. When stress results in a failure to satisfy needs and wants, the system threatens to become unstable. When the failure of satisfaction gives rise to a grievance, the system crosses the first threshold of instability.

Fundamentally, living systems are never static: they either grow or contract. Expansion and balanced or symmetrical development are signs of a healthy system. Contraction or unbalanced development and fragmentation are signs of internal trouble. *The first rule of instability analysis is that, whether a system is expanding or contracting, every living system is always searching for equilibrium with its environment. We may call this the line it can hold. The relationship with the environment is dynamic, frequently changing. Thus the search generates tension and stress.* That search is the underlying process of a living system at its most abstract. Finding and defining that line in clear terms is the first task of a J2 analyst trying to predict an instability problem.

Health of the State- the importance of normality

The starting point for analysis is the normality baseline. Every system has a set of normal conditions, unique to itself, that are best understood as a predictable set of outcomes from a controllable set of inputs. What this means is that the members of the system learn to have expectations about the rewards they should expect from their labor and who is responsible for providing food, shelter, safety—the basic necessities--both in quality, quantity, and timing. Without a high degree of predictability, no system is stable.

When changes occur, they may signify larger factors at work. The particulars of these normal conditions and the departures from the norm are critical for understanding instability.

The system itself teaches the lessons and forms the expectations of its members. For example, people in a state that has few resources tend to have low expectations about choice and freedom because the margin of survival is narrow. In richer states, expectations may be higher. Relative to instability, the members of the two states will have different thresholds for political action based on the systems failure to satisfy wants and needs. In addition, they will not be motivated by the same kinds of deprivations.

Our studies have told us where and how to study systems, and support a large number of lessons learned. However, the specific details of one systemic breakdown are usually only guides in studying another. What's more, systems are dynamic. Even within a single system the norms may change, sometimes quite suddenly.

Nevertheless, when a system's performance is measured against its own history of performance, in past good and bad times, extremely precise judgments may be made about the present health of the system. After all, the past is what has shaped the expectations

of the members. It constitutes a major part of their standard for measuring the system's satisfaction of wants and needs. This is the foundation for normalcy, which is the entry point for analysis. Some features of normalcy are institutionalized in laws and ordinances. Most are contained in folklore and manifest in the complaints of the members and in political commentaries.

The Center--Living with stress

Stress is a permanent feature of living systems. Both good health and illness cause stress because in both conditions the system must try to satisfy shifting needs and wants. Rapid growth and contraction cause severe stress that can lead to failure and make a living system unstable.

Internal disagreements among the citizenry about the degree or quality of performance are part of the daily stress in a system. *Thus, **the second rule of instability analysis is that instability starts with a failure of the system (including its parts) to satisfy a need or a want**.* When the failure results in a grievance and demand for redress by members of the system, the instability becomes political and a potential challenge to the regime.

Each system and its subsystems manage and tolerate stress differently, but all have full time mechanisms for handling the normal, predictable range of troubles that attend daily life. In addition, all have standby adaptive mechanisms for handling more severe degrees of stress.

As stress increases, the system applies a predictable and orderly series of measures to cope with the increased pressure, until it contains and reduces the instability, collapses under it, or fragments. This orderly process can be understood as crisis management or the cycle of collapse and fragmentation.

The Adversary

The adversary is the group that voices a grievance about the system's failures, demands redress and benefits from the government's surrender of function and space. It might not even be the instigator of unrest, but the beneficiary is the enemy and its expectations become insatiable

Development of an Organized Opposition

Identity	– Who's in?
Authority	-- Who's in charge?
Purpose	-- What's the endgame?
Structure	-- How's it organized?
Action	-- What does it do?

The Range of Problems

The figure below is a paradigm or typology of threats that concern J2. Instability problems lie on the violent, internal arms of the chart. In 20 years of study, only nine separate kinds of violent phenomena are associated with instability. These differ mainly in the actors, the leadership and the nature of the goals. We have learned that phenomena evolve and mutate. A sympathetic strike whose aim is to correct pension rights of railroad workers in Poland in 1980, for example, evolved into Solidarnosc, the nationwide political movement that almost brought down Polish communism.

Figure. Threat Paradigm
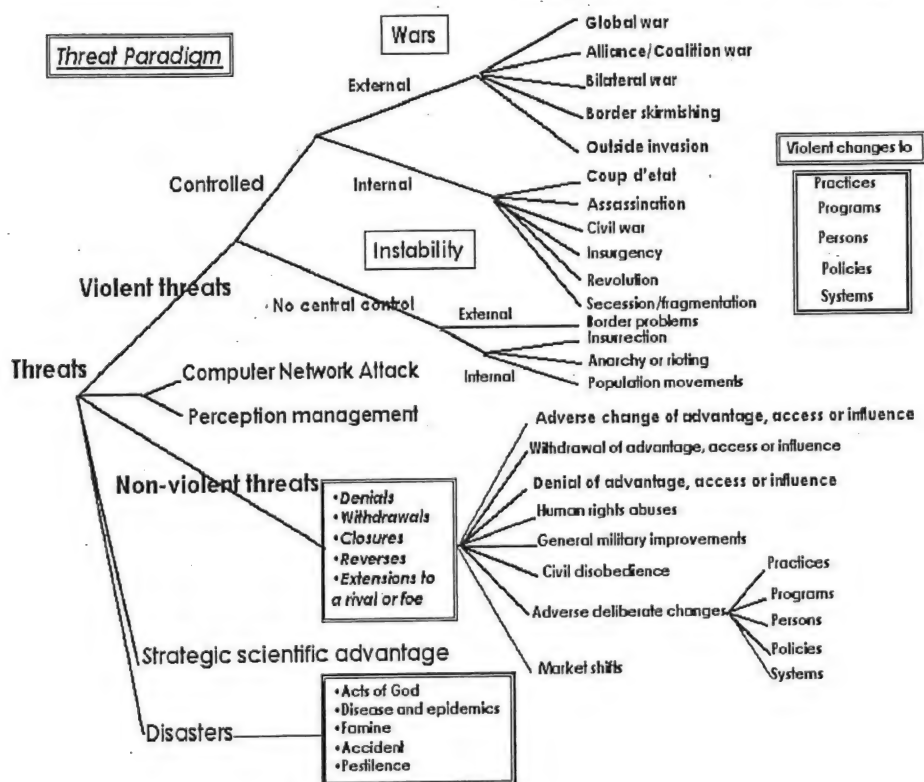
Detailed explanations of each internal threat are not necessary for understanding the phenomenon of instability. The differences are important in assessing the scale of the movement and in predicting the likelihood of success, but our experience is that the underlying dynamic process is the same in all nine phenomena.

The Analysis

For the purpose of diagnosing and predicting instability, normalcy and conditions of stress are best measured in **space and functionality.**

Space

The health or instability of a system is most easily measured at its periphery, at the borders. Instability is almost always first noticeable at the periphery because this is where it

starts. Normal conditions always unravel first where the government's authority is weakest, by definition, and that is at the frontiers. ***The third rule of instability analysis is that it always begins on the border.***

For the analyst, the periphery or frontier must be understood in ***three senses***: 1) the geographic periphery, the actual physical boundaries of the state; 2) the extent of effective internal control; and, 3) the political periphery, the boundary defining those who have power in the system and those who do not. In all three senses, the effectiveness of control is measured in quality, quantity and expanse.

These translate into three questions the analyst must answer: how effective is the control, with how many forces, and how far does it reach.

Our experience is that for each country the analyst may be precise in discerning and measuring both subjective and objective measures of effective control that form the normalcy baseline. Subjective measures are the expectations of people about what is the rightful land of the state. An objective measure is the acreage the state effectively controls. Changes to these provide tip-off that the system is becoming unstable.

Geographic space
In good times, a system grows. It will expand to the limits of its capabilities to control space and resources and provide some level of common public services. It finds the limits of its growth by butting against adjacent systems. Thus, each expands its functions and the space it occupies or controls over time until it reaches a condition of balance between its external environment and the resources it is willing to apply to expansion, border defense or border protection. The amount of space a state can control over time becomes the settled territory of a state.

As noted above, the three attributes of control of space constitute one set of measurements of instability. When a state system is in trouble, it contracts, surrendering geography and functionality in a series of moves that enable analysts to measure the gravity of internal instability. The state will endeavor to redefine the sustainable spatial and functional boundaries in a downward spiral unless or until a point of balance can be restored at some level. In short, living systems always seek a quantity of terrain "lines they can hold."

The border is always one of the first places to look for signs of instability because this is the entry point for unwanted ideas, goods and persons. It is a great entry point for analysis because the system's ability to police itself is on public display. At the border, for example, *quality* is manifest in how effective or strict the police, border guards or troops are at controlling irregular or illegal traffic or transit. *Quantity* means how many troops or policemen are needed to maintain a certain level of effectiveness. *Expanse* means how much of the border is controlled at that level of effectiveness.

At the border, a first sign of trouble is often an easing in the enforcement of customs or transit rules. Beyond that it may also mean that the system cannot police itself, control immigration and emigration, control smuggling, the infiltration of revolutionary tracts, collect

duties and excise or control trade to the extent that it could in better times.

Another good early sign of systemic weakness is the need to reinforce the border in escalating sequence with more border police and then with military forces. Follow-on steps might include a reduction in the numbers of personnel committed to border duties. Finally, remote parts of the border might be abandoned because of duress in other parts of the national territory.

Of course, the state always reserves the right and determination to restore normalcy at a later time. A good example is the six monthly extensions of the safe haven zone to the guerrillas in Colombia. The determination to take back the zone at a future time of strength is the tip off that a surrender of territory has occurred because of internal weakness, vice as a matter of right.

A political system in serious decline can no longer defend its borders or enforce its sovereignty on its frontiers as well as when the system is strong and healthy. This might mean that it can no longer deter military incursions or repulse a military attack across the border.

If the system fails to find sustainable boundaries and functions, it collapses and is replaced by an alternative system.   Space equals national territory. A healthy system can defend its own territory and also seize that of less healthy neighbors. At a minimum it can enforce customs regulations and prevent entry by undesirables or most undesirables. Once again, normalcy depends on the system's history of performance.

In some instances, the loss of control of space occurs within the national territory itself, not necessarily at the border. Remote mountainous regions such as south central Colombia or Northeastern Luzon are traditional strongholds of regime opponents and lawless elements.

In the interior, the measures are similar to those at the border. Effectiveness in controlling interior space is measured in crime statistics, numbers of police and troops and expanse of patrol areas. As a negative example of control, Colombia's formal acknowledgement of a large interior zone as a safehaven for socialist rebels represents an enormous concession of authority and signifies severe internal weakness. Sustained Inroads against the rebels are a clear measure of government effectiveness.

Political Space

Space also has a metaphoric meaning –political space. *The fourth rule of instability analysis is that instability is always centripetal in that it always moves from the border to a center of power.* Grievances produce no effects if they remain inchoate on the periphery. To effect change, they must influence the centers of power or forge an alternate, competing power center.

Figure. Popular Unrest in Order of Increasing Threat

Mass discontent
   (Editorials, petitions, rumors)

Non-violent Civil Disobedience
   (Strikes, marches, vigils, underground activities)

Small violent acts of protest
   (defacing and damaging property)

Violent disruptions of civil order
   (Blocking roads, rails, airports, street demonstrations)

General Rioting and Looting
   (Crimes against property)

Organized insurrection
   (crimes against people and property-boming, kidnappings, acts of terror)

Insurgency
   (from organized crime to conventional combat)

Civil war
   (conventional combat)

Revolution or secession

Every system tolerates a definite amount of political discourse and public political display. In some, opposition is vocal and encouraged, but violence crosses the line of tolerable political expression. In other systems, any organized, public display is a challenge to political authority. In each system, the symptoms of unraveling control at the political periphery tend to be unique, but distinctive departures from normalcy.

Capital cities harbor all sorts of miscreants and malcontents who are normally kept in check or in gaol. When rule-enforcing systems are under stress, public political activism will rise. More police and armed forces on the street to control demonstrations that were not allowed in better times are sure signs of inability to control political space. Use of military forces to back up the police is a stress maker.

The center of rule making and rule enforcing power is always the point of convergence of opposition groups on the geographic and political periphery. The two may merge in a movement to effect systemic change. They may be in competition in a fragmentation scenario as when a province seeks to break away from the center. The end game is always played out in the location of those who wield power.

Functionality

Each human system tends to be defined by how it performs its basic functions in degree or quality, in what time and over what geographic space or portion of the membership. The performance of key functions is often part of a system's uniqueness and its complexity. Each state system establishes its own levels and standards of satisfactory performance that shape the culture and, more importantly, the expectations of the citizenry. Even the most downtrodden populations have expectations of government performance whose failure of satisfaction can lead to internal violence.

Consequently, instability is also manifest in the breakdown of government functions and public reaction to the breakdown. According to *Miller*, all living systems, including political systems, have 19 subsystems for basic functions for processing energy, matter and information. They include defense, internal regulation, decision making, memory, manufacturing, distribution and so on.

For our studies in J2, we have found that for the purposes of predictive analysis we need watch four: rule making (political authority and problem solving), rule enforcing (defense and security), economic welfare (creating and sustaining wealth), and social welfare (development and protection of the quality of life and property).

As with the attribute of space, each of the four functions has four measures: quality, quantity, expanse and timing. The definitions are similar to those concerning space. The addition of timing is important because functions must be performed on schedule. A failure to meet scheduled functions is an easy tip off that a system is under stress.

Problem solving and rule making

The goal of instability is to always to change the wielders of power or the terms by which they operate. In ascending order, the ladder of things that may change includes practices, programs, personnel, policies, governments and finally change of system, either through fragmentation or revolution. Under stress the progression of change is almost always in that order.

For the purpose of predictive accuracy, some improvident action by the government is always the trigger for internal violence. Often you know it only after you see it. Stress often is the result of poor execution of policy. This may stem from poor practices, a poor program, poor personnel or a poor policy. The things most resistant to change are policy and system. Personnel are expendable in all systems.

The issues are familiar -- ownership of land, possession of the other sources of wealth and exercise of power of control over others. Disputes over these and about the fairness of the dispute resolution process are the most likely to create stress in and against the rule makers. In 2000, the tension between President Djukanovic in Montenegro and former President Milosevic and his successor Kostunica in Yugoslavia/Serbia illustrates how leadership personalities and control of territory may be intertwined. Irredentist claims and leadership pride underlie three bouts of conventional war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The threshold at which popular hostility to some ill-advised government measure achieves the critical mass for violent change depends often on the availability of avenues for peaceful change. Some authoritarian systems are remarkably sensitive to public sentiment and can live with chronic discontent. They respond appropriately and sufficiently to avert internal upheaval.

Most authoritarian and pluralistic democratic systems, however, are prone to respond to economic and social discontent with repression and force. Most ruler's first reaction to public protests is to perceive a challenge to authority which must not be endured. This is known as the *compression phenomenon*.

Serving bullets in response to demands for bread is never wise policy. Demands for food when shortages are real are almost never challenges to political legitimacy, unless the government chooses to make them so. When it so chooses, a government guarantees it will misread both threats and offers of aid and will bring itself down in violence.

The fifth rule of instability is that governments almost always bring themselves down. In almost all cases of government removal by violence, the trigger for unrest is an ill-advised, misdirected or ill-timed action by the rule makers to fix, repress or alter conditions as to make them intolerable.

Brief case study
In the Soviet and other socialist systems, minimal expectations of functionality included a government supply of food at subsidized prices, guaranteed jobs; free schooling and medical care. Quality and quantity were never adequate by Western standards of practice, but they made the difference between survival and not.

Through local party functionaries, local populations could bring pressure to bear on the rule makers to make spot fixes in local conditions. National party leaders were careful to ensure extra supplies of food, for example, on national holidays and celebrations. This shell game worked as long as the distribution systems and infrastructure remained intact.

In the final years, local officials lacked the ability and resources to fix systemic failures in the agricultural or public health systems. National leaders had no incentive to make major changes because the consequences were unpredictable and could lead to revolution. Systemic problems require systemic fixes – the definition of revolution. Neither the local populace nor the national leaders wanted systemic change, until conditions threatened survival and revolutionary change occurred without their wishes.

Rule Enforcing
Rule enforcers include both public order and military forces. Their unique roles in protection of boundaries, persons and property require weapons that make satisfaction of their needs and wants particularly important for most systems. Unrest among security forces creates a special set of instability phenomena, including military and praetorian coups. The military ouster of the government of Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan in October 1999 is a reminder

that the guys with the guns win in the short run. ***The sixth rule of instability analysis is that the organizations with the most or best guns always decide the outcome.***

Defense of territory is one of the key functions of the rule enforcers. Obviously, stress can come from outside a system, as from interaction with other adjacent systems. This is the definition of conflict. Failure to defend territory from an outside source is the definition of defeat and can aggravate internal instability. A system or state that exerts pressure on another always creates stress in both systems that can lead to internal instability. The Kargil war in northern Kashmir in May-June 1999 and Pakistan's support for Kashmiri Islamic militants illustrate the importance of defense and the role outside influences in stressing a state system.

Economics and the creation of wealth

For instability analysis, the large measures of state and system economic performance are of little help. Our studies have found that access to essentials at the household level is the vital entry point. In most countries, these essentials --food grains, cooking oil and heating oil-- are supplied or subsidized by the government. A study in the mid-1980's determined that about 75% of all popular upheavals since World War II that led to changes in governments were the direct result of government initiated changes in the price or availability of staple grains (wheat bread or flour and rice), heating oil (kerosene) and edible cooking oils. Most people in the world stir fry.

In centrally planned economies, governments have assumed direct responsibility for their provision to the citizens via a hugely complex bureaucracy. In most third world systems, government subsidizes the food vendors or the processing companies. In both, changes in the subsidy are reflected in street prices which dictate who has access to how much. When rising prices for food erode the margin for other essential purchases, they quickly lead to rioting

The livelihood of populations depends critically on the government support, which must be reliable in time, quality and quantity within rather tight parameters. Governments that neglect these demands do so at their own risk.

Food is an absolute need in every living system. But state systems use a wide range of means to satisfy this need . As a result analysts often overlook or underrate an examination of the food systems for clear signs of systemic weakness until food riots occur.

In many Mid Eastern states, pita is a state–subsidized commodity. Size, grain content and cost are regulated. Changes in any of the three have generated riots. In Egypt, government has tried to manipulate the size of pita, the weight of pita, and the grain vs. sawdust mix of the dough to reduce the burden of budgetary entitlements. All have lead to rioting.

In Asia, rice is the food grain that must be watched. In Indonesia, government provided subsidies to the producers of 19 commodities, including rice, so that street prices remained in reach of the poor. When it lifted the subsidies under IMF pressure, the move

had the same effect as taking rice off the market. People revolted.

In North Korea, changes in the rice-to-corn mix, which is the national staple, have been reliable measures of the adequacy of the grain harvest and the extent of resulting discontent. When food shortages became severe after the 1995 floods, J2 analysts had to develop a different yardstick for system decline as manifest in food distribution. Pyongyang instituted triage, maintaining responsibility for food for the army and top party membership, but delegating it to provincial leaders for the non-party citizenry. This had the effect of cutting the country into two food zones. The northern zone four provinces along the China border became a dependency of international food donors. The area from Pyongyang south to the Demilitarized Zone survived under the traditional communist distribution system and off limits to foreign food donors.

In 1998, Indonesia provided unique insights into the relationship between the macro-economy and the micro-economy. Four times that year urban people rioted when the value of the rupiah reached 10000 to the $1.00. The causes of the phenomenon are numerous but one factor is that when the money became worthless, no amount of work could earn enough to obtain basic essentials for survival in the cities.

Social welfare and preserving the quality of life
In many countries, stress also arises from the failure of a system to satisfy social needs, including protection of persons and property, provision of educational opportunities, access to medical care, and public health and safety.   While deterioration in the quality of life seldom leads to outbreaks of violence, it contributes importantly to other causes and are important analytical measurements for determining how unstable a system may be at a point in time.

The signs of instability in this set of functions are easy to spot. Schools and public health facilities will close. Power will be erratic. Gasoline and creature comforts may be unavailable. The system will become accident prone and be unable to effect repairs. Crime transitions from violations of property to crimes against persons. Diseases that do not exist in modern societies become epidemics as public health and sewer systems degenerate. In some countries such conditions may be and often are chronic. Unless they are voiced as grievances by organized groups that try to effect change in the power center, the conditions alone are never predictors of political change.

On the other hand, these conditions enable precise measurements of how unstable a system actually is. They also are dynamic in that they get progressively worse until normally healthy people die. In our experience no system is forever immune to its underlying social system weaknesses, but millions might have to die before social conditions generate sufficient pressure to effect change.

Causality

Observations of numerous collapses of governments in the past 20 years, especially the regime changes at the end of the Warsaw Pact, have enabled us to discern two tiers of causal factors. The factors are distinguished by whether they are conditions that signify instability but cannot bring down a government without additional factors or actors, or conditions that are sufficient in themselves to bring down a government. Our experience is that economic and social conditions cannot bring down governments. Secondly, rule makers and enforcers –in power or in opposition-- bring down governments. They may be helped by the economic and social conditions.

Useful but not sufficient causes

Economic and social conditions are the backdrop of many government changes and certainly contribute to motives for change. By themselves, that is without some penetration of the leadership functions, these problems can endure indefinitely without bringing down a regime.   In Cuba, North Korea, China and India and Pakistan and a host of African states economic and social problems are chronic.

Much academic research continues to explore these domains for diagnostic indicators of instability leading to government change. Intelligence analysts should beware and be wary of the danger of mirror imaging. Poverty ridden states are not necessarily more prone to internal upheaval than those on the cusp of modernity.

The post-war record of government changes suggests that alterations to dismal but survivable conditions are more likely to generate upheaval than the fact of dismal conditions alone. This means that leadership decisions to make alterations are the more critical issues in violent government change.

Another important point is that one man's trash is another's treasure. One man's poverty might be luxury in another system. Cross country and cultural comparisons are feckless because persons prone to act in a system do so in that system's context and history.

To illustrate, North Koreans know conditions in South Korea are than those in the North, but they do not make demands for better conditions, not just because of the brutal consequences of public protest. They have no history of such luxury in the North and it does not cross their minds to insist that they enjoy similar conditions. Consequently we have found no examples of an effective opposition based on deprivation alone. On the other hand, leadership corruption in distributing starvation rations has generated food riots – not because the portion was so small, but because the leaders were perceived as or proven to be skimming.

Sufficient causes

Rule makers and rule enforcers have the capabilities to change government whether conditions are good or bad at all levels of governance. Economic and social conditions provide the justification for a change that that one or other leadership group intended in any case.

The attitude of the rule enforcers-police, paramilitary forces, armed forces-are the pivotal factor in almost all violent government change. If the forces of order remain loyal cohesive and responsive, no government can fall unless removed by superior force from outside. If they do not, a palace coup or praetorian takeover in an ingenious variety can easily occur.

Every government in the Warsaw Pact, including the Soviet regime, was overturned because the rule enforcers split or sided with the opposition. In 1998, the Soeharto regime was overthrown when it lost the confidence of the Indonesian armed forces. On the other hand, the simplest explanation for the durability of the Castro and North Korean regimes is the constant pampering and bribery of key security forces, coupled with constant rotation and purges.

Outside intervention
Outside forces alter and skew the analysis of instability because the phenomenology changes. Instead of a tidy internal problem, the external dimension adds the prospect of having to analyze the danger of war using force-on-force methods while trying to assess the danger of violent government change.

Powerful or worried neighbors must always be watched when studying most states, not islands. The Soviets used this principle to spread communism in the immediate post-War era. Soviet doctrine avoided attacking a state capable of fielding and sustaining large conventional military forces, but encouraged intervention in the event of collapse, as occurred repeatedly within the Warsaw Pact and in Afghanistan.
(China is a communist anomaly because it has attacked and fought every one of its neighbors.)

The Breakdown Process

Power goes somewhere in every breakdown scenario. This discussion concerns how the process works as we have observed it in J2. The diagram shows two lines of convergence and divergence that intersect in a box labeled "power sharing." The baseline is a time line. The left side of the diagram depicts the movement of power from the regime to the opposition, leading to power sharing. The right side of the diagram depicts what occurs when one party to the power sharing arrangement attempts to breakout to assert power alone.

It is vital for the analyst to track its direction and quantity. In some systems it is difficult to discern the beneficiary of a power transfer, particularly if the adversary lies within the ruling elite. As the government weakens, the adversary grows stronger. As the two converge, the danger of violence is greatest because both have the motive and some capability for armed conflict. The government will have institutional resources to prevent a further loss of authority and power. The adversary will have achieved legitimacy and a following, thus affording non-institutional capabilities for pressure.

The Breakdown Process
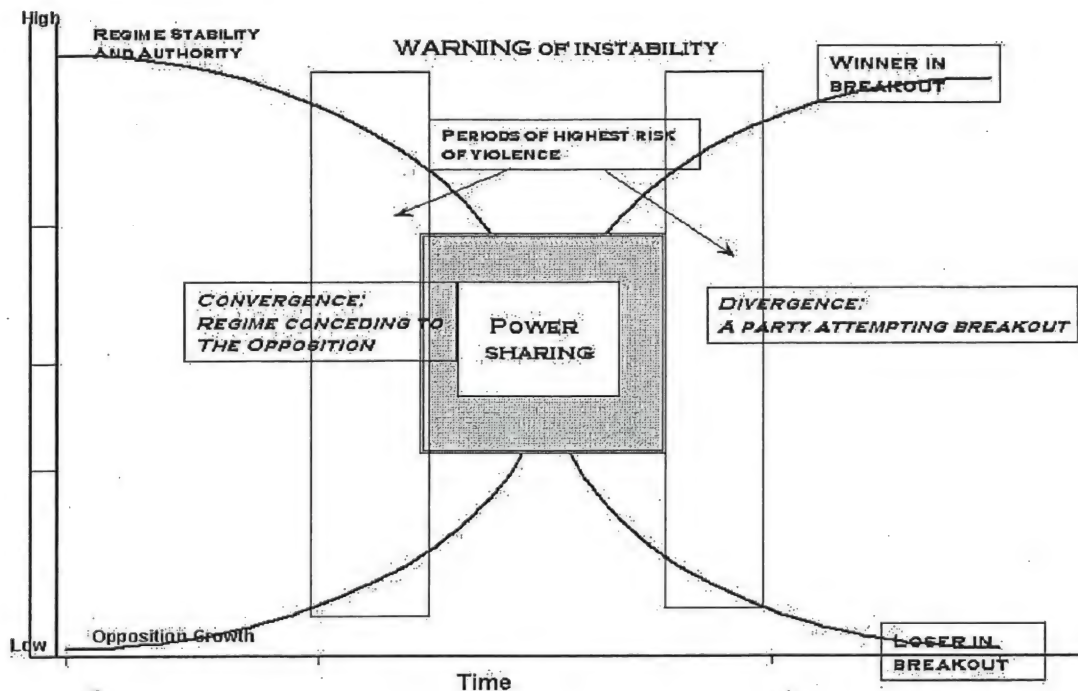
If neither prevails in the struggle during convergence, they will continue to converge into a condition of power sharing. At some point of rough equilibrium, the government and its adversary will share functions and space. Power sharing is always temporary and unstable because both parties want out. In practice, a power sharing arrangement can last a long time until a party has or thinks it has the capability successfully to breakout. The irony of power sharing is that it is almost always peaceful.

Attempts at breakout are inevitable for the adversary or the government. Breakout is a move to redefine the power arrangement with the party breaking out seizing some increased advantage, if not the preponderance of power. Thus the effort to change the relationship will be resisted and often leads to violence. For the analyst the onset of violence after a period of cooperation is a sign of breakout. **Convergence leading to power sharing and divergence away from power sharing are the two most dangerous periods in an instability problem.**

Cycle of collapse – finding a line to hold

A very clear three-stage cycle defines the process of the regime's attempts to cope with instability. This is not a random process though it may look disorderly. All states provide for severe internal turmoil. In the United States, for example, the US President has the authority to impose some 500 different emergency measures—up to and including nationwide martial law—without Congressional approval. Many of the measures imposed on the defeated southern states after the Civil War remain available to the President.

Advance preparations may prove inadequate because the turmoil may exceed anticipated degrees of trouble, especially when accompanied by outside threats. Alternatively, the state may underestimate the capabilities needed to limit damage or stabilize an internal condition, and thus may prove unable to cope. But few leaders will recognize that point until it is too late for them to escape or survive.

The three stages in a single cycle are: underreaction, overreaction and concession or damage containment. The instability process diagram depicts a smooth curve of decline in state authority. On a tactical level, the decline occurs in a series of stair steps downward represented by the three stages of underreaction, overreaction and concession.

State systems may repeat these stages for years, in an ebb-and-flow pattern until the system rebounds or fails totally. It is misleading to speak of failed states. Regimes fail but political systems, economies and social systems evolve, change, and may be replaced. Sometimes they fragment into new states. Many economies, for example, have devolved to lower levels of productivity, but few simply fail. People survive and struggle to make a living even in the most primitive political and economic conditions.

Systemic failure is seldom irreversible and never inevitable. Lack of resources may aggravate instability, but usually system failure is the result of human error. As noted above, governments are the primary agents of their own downfall, barring invasion.

Figure. Summary of the Action-Reaction Cycle

Underreaction phase:
- State tests seriousness of the Opposition
- Opposition tests strength of the State
- Insignificant negotiations and exchanges of threats
- Intervention of higher authorities to stiffen resolve of locals on the spot
- Loss of State credibility
- Sterile crisis management techniques

Overreaction phase:
- State applies disproportionate force to destroy the Opposition
- If force succeeds, the situation stabilizes and recycles
- If the Opposition resists successfully it gains martyr status and legitimacy
- State loses credibility and makes concessions

Concession phase:
- State concedes power, functions and stature to the Opposition
- Opposition gains legitimacy
- Power sharing develops
- State and Opposition prepare for the next test of power
    - State to recapture lost ground and functions
    - Opposition to take more; or secure fragmentation

The following discussion and description borrows heavily from Irving Janis and Stephen Withey.

Underreaction is always the first and reflexive response to trouble even in Stalinist states such as North Korea. Leaders have no way to gauge the gravity of an internal problem until normal coping mechanisms are strained or fail. In fact, the failure of normal coping mechanisms is probably the only way to gauge the gravity of a problem.

Leaders also tend to deny or minimize internal problems for a variety of well-known reasons. These include, prominently, success in having coped with similar problems in the past; cost-benefit calculations that invariably militate against change; and wishful thinking because huge internal forces resist change. Almost no leaders are willing to pay the political and other costs of confronting a crisis if they may be avoided. All state leaders try to solve problems at the lowest cost. Thus, they create mechanisms to cope with the predictable, normal, range of internal troubles. These mechanisms include police forces, fire departments, public health services, schools, jails public works departments and so on.

Thus, in a large city such as Los Angeles – the scene of serious race riots—authorities have no choice but to rely on police force to cope with street disorders, even though the know the risks of escalation to rioting. The police and other public services created for normal emergencies, in a sense have the duty of first failure in every system.

This is not just blockheadedness. Most of the time, the normal public services have considerable elasticity. Lines will stretch but not break. And then recovery will begin. The size and capabilities of these normal forces of order and public service are the mirror image of the normal intensity and extent of internal problems. That is how they are defined. It bears repeating that all leaders try to solve sudden disruptive internal problems at the lowest cost. Success is an attribute of statesmanship.

But this dooms the police to be the first to be sent into a seething abnormal security situation, just to make sure it is abnormal, and they most often will be overwhelmed. If they are not, then by definition, the condition was with the foreseeable range of security problems..

This point of first failure is the entry point for defining the gravity of internal problems. If the police fail to contain a problem, then the threat is serious. In July 1980, the Gdansk Shipyard in Poland went on strike, largely in sympathy with railroad workers over pension issues. Poland had experienced numerous episodes of labor activism, so the Gierek government was not excessively concerned. Usually the local police and shipyard party officials, backed by a showing of paramilitary police, were sufficient to break the strike. But July 1980 was different. This time, the shipyard union locked down the yard and refused to allow the police or party officials inside. The confrontations at the Gdansk shipyard in July 1980 were the point of failure by the normal resources of emergency problem solving.

Overreaction occurs when the police fail. The instinctive and reflexive response to doing too little, is to do a whole lot more. Thus, to prevent a security situation from getting out of control, authorities will call out increasingly heavily armed security forces- more manpower more guns more resources. As one warning practitioner from Australia remarked, he never saw a problem that couldn't be solved by more guns. Ultimately the forces established for territorial defense at the borders – the army – may be called out for internal defense of the state political system.

The next stage in the Polish drama leading to the formation of Solidarnosc was the Gierek government's attempt to break into the shipyard using the paramilitary police. This occurred in August and September 1980. The ZOMO failed to break the strike.

The main problem with overreaction is that it never is a serious or tailored response crafted to solve a problem. In Poland water cannons and battering rams represented the response of the communist party authorities to what were economic complaints. Whereas in underreaction, the response is too little, in overreaction the response is overkill. Both are characterized by mismatch between problem and response. Analysts need to be attuned to the congruence or lack of symmetry between the two in order to recognize the phase of instability.

Overreaction tends to be a panic response that interprets an otherwise manageable problem into an attack against the legitimacy of the ruling order. It is intended not to solve problems but to stabilize a situation or condition, to buy time.

Governments are not necessarily incorrect in perceiving a challenge to a policy, for example, as a potential challenge to government authority. The line between the two is often ill-defined. Governments often err in seeing the larger challenge prematurely, and in so doing creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In North Korea after the severe floods that created famine conditions in 1995, reversion to barter for goods and services was punished as counterrevolutionary. The Pyongyang government interpreted the development of primitive market conditions as an affront to socialist legitimacy, even though the government was failing to provide food and health care. It is clear that the North Korean people were not trying to overthrow the government, they were trying to survive. In fact close to 2 million died of starvation, malnutrition and the de Long Stalinist practice, however, understood the implicit political threat in self-help measures not approved or organized by the Workers' Party. Thus a purge occurred in the midst of famine.

Overreaction is almost inevitable, but collapse is one of two outcomes. Overreaction can achieve success by catching opposition forces unprepared. Martial law in Algeria managed to prolong the life of a repressive military –backed regime for a decade. A sharp crackdown followed by supportive and appropriate responses to correct a grievance or condition of stress may succeed in reversing internal instability. But even in instances when repression alone prolongs a regime for a decade or more, the underlying problems do not go away.

Overreaction outside the context of a program of response to underlying conditions or grievances usually signals the intellectual bankruptcy of the leadership. Overreactions are designed to prevent surrender of function or space and thus payment of greater systemic costs. Sometimes they work, but most times they don't.

The Indonesian armed forces ousted Soeharto rather than change. Pakistan's Army overthrow almost all hope of modernization when it toppled Nawaz Sharif rather than face the prospect of a durable peace with India and the foreseeable evisceration of the Army. In both instances the Army leadership acted to save itself rather than risk more enlightened response. In Indonesia, the Soeharto sacrifice failed at least in the short run. In 2000, the jury is still out in Pakistan, but prospects are not bright.

Concession – or the search for a line to hold The final phase of the cycle is concession. After having spent, if not exhausted significant ready to hand resources to stabilize a condition, authorities give up the space they were trying to defend, or stop providing services that are beyond the reduced level of capabilities. They regroup and try again if the overreaction fails to stabilize the problem.

The concessions are always temporary measures to buy time and rebuild resources with the clear intention of recovering lost space and functionality. Concession portends the start of another cycle of underreaction, overreaction and concession because the authorities must allow their new measures time to work or to fail. Thus a period of observation and transition to the new cycle is inevitable.

Time is always the enemy of the established order in a crisis management situation.

Few state systems in the post-war era have managed to halt their decline once it entered the three phase cycle. Some have prolonged the agony; a few have evolved usually with external aid. Most have led to collapse not of the state but of the political system. In North Korea, authorities managed a devolution of the economic system from a highly centralized second world industrial state to a highly decentralized rural agrarian barter state, while keeping intact the Stalinist political leadership system. But most often, the cycle is broken by a fundamental change of system, such as a revolution, or by outside intervention, such as conquest or assimilation by a neighboring state.

In Poland in September 1980, the concession phase was marked by the ouster of the Gierek government and its replacement by Kania and Pinkowski. Five three-phase cycles followed almost precisely in 90 day increments until General Jaruzelski imposed martial law on Poland rather than face a Warsaw Pact invasion and occupation. The Polish Army invaded Poland rather than undergo the travails of Czechoslovakia in 1968 at the tender mercies of the Soviet Army.

Variations of the three phase cycle occurred in all the states of the former Warsaw Pact including the Soviet Union itself. The fragmentation of the Union was the ultimate end-state concession to the Republics. The Yeltsin led revolution signaled the inability of the

Gorbachev government to find a line of space and functionality it could hold. The fragmentation decentralized the breakdown into smaller parcels, some of which have stabilized and recovered with Western help. In others, the process continues.

Sequencing in a phase

Within each phase, the authorities will exhaust a fairly standard repertoire of measures to try to end or mitigate stress from the mobs or opposition. Usually this involves assignment of blame to someone or institution. For the analysts, blaming is a key indicator of change.

Figure. The Ladder of Blame
The people
The practices of the local officials
The implementation of the program
The personnel managing the program
The devisers of the program
The program
The policy underpinning the program
The responsible government officials
The government
The system

Usually leadership elites blame the people first. They may be described as uncooperative, ungrateful, benighted, or counterrevolutionary. In states having a national religion or ideology, lack of fervor, backsliding and counterrevolutionary activity are the most common reasons for blaming an unworthy populace.

Every leadership group in the Warsaw Pact used this scapegoat prior to its ouster. Popular obduracy justifies stern internal controls and crackdowns, including repression or control of certain commercial activities, confiscation of hoarded goods, public executions, purges and indoctrination campaigns. These are the signs that the leaders blame the people for whatever is wrong with the state.

They also should alert an analyst to the probability that this system is entering or is in a repression condition. One thing we have learned about repression as a solution to short term problems not previously repressed is that eventually it leads to explosion. The overthrow of the Romanian government is a classic example of repression. Repression almost never is the answer to a problem, but it might prolong a regime living on borrowed time.

The second set of fixes within a phase involves blaming the executors of policy. The rationale is that conditions would be better with better bureaucrats or local leaders. The signs of this phase are allegations of local corruption, replacement of local leaders, investigations of wrongdoing at the local level. Local officials are easy to blame and replace

and do often aggravate a larger problem, sometimes to the point of making life intolerable. Most of the time they are scapegoats to avoid having to examine whether the policy is rotten.

One practice that is almost universal is the replacement of individuals associated with a failed policy. The US and every state practices this in the assignment of ambassadors and appointment of key bureaucrats. Thus, the analysts should pay attention to the replacement of personnel to determine whether it bespeaks scapegoating or policy change. The press treatment is a certain guide, because the local populace also is asking the same question.

Replacement of leaders at higher level also occurs as part of scapegoating, and may not signal policy change.

Poland is a near text book study of scapegoating to avoid having to change policy. In September 1980, the Polish Workers Party removed Edward Gierek as leader for his failures to execute policy and for corruption (what else!) Gierek was no more or less corrupt than Pinkowski or Kania who replaced him, he just failed to keep the peace and to settle the protests at the Gdansk shipyard. Later it removed Pinkowski and still later Kania. Finally the Party installed General Jaruzelski as political leader, violating one of the basic tenets of communism – Bonapartism. (According to communist doctrine, a communist party never installs a military leader because the military overthrows the party, one way or another, as Napoleon did during the French Revolution.) True to form, Jaruzelski imposed martial law on Poland rather than invite the Soviets in.

US analysts need to be careful when the see the word corruption. Corruption does *not* signal that leaders are in fact corrupt as US political students or pundits might conclude. Corruption in most systems means that the corrupt person failed the system in some fashion that is no longer tolerable. It does not signify a moral so much as a political judgment.

The third set of variables that may be changed, after blaming fails, is the *policy* that is the source and target of discontent. Policy change is serious because lies close to legitimacy and authority. A policy change is comparable to admitting a mistake. In some states the policy stems from the state ideology. To acknowledge error in one translates into erosion of the other. Thus, some systems can tolerate this, but most cannot. Further an admission of guilt rarely satisfies an opposition because the admission bespeaks the need for atonement or reparations.

Short of admitting the policy is in error, leadership may gamble on a change in implementation or practice or in local implementors. It is easier to admit mistakes in implementation than in fundamental principles. Analysts should understand that mistakes in implementation almost always camouflage a gambit to buy time.

The final set of measures involves systemic changes. Leaderships under stress will dismantle parts of their own ruling apparatus to stay in power. This is a last ditch effort, and also may be part of deception play to divert attention from the real thrust of national enterprise. Examples of this occurred throughout the Soviet Union when Gorbachev was

trying to buy time for the system—not just for his own tenure- to right itself.

Analysts should recognize that leaders under extreme stress conditions or products of religious or political ideologies have huge blind spots. They simply do not see nor have the conduits for accurate information that would enable them to see problems as they are.

Timing—the Largest Uncertainty

Research and practice have yet to provide enough data to develop probabilities for assessing timing of the phases or total cycle of instability. The seasons of the year seem to be strongly influential in timing decisions, to the extent that timing is a controlled variable. On the other hand, the timing of key events is often serendipitous.

In statist systems, timing is often tied to the state planning cycle. This does not seem to be deliberate, but a byproduct of system dynamics. Thus each cycle of collapse in Poland prior to the imposition of martial law lasted almost precisely 90 days between July 1980 and December 1981. The interesting point is that the duration of the final period of collapse was over 18 months, climaxing in martial law.

This was the subset of a larger collapse phenomenon that ended in 1989 with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact.

Events in Russia that led to Yeltsin's successful countercoup and the demise of Soviet communism also occurred in 90 day increments. They began with the formation of the United Salvation Front in Moscow in October 1990 and climaxed in the abortive overthrow of the Gorbachev government by staunch communists in August 1991. This periodicity corresponds to the planning cycle in a statist system. This is tied to the main production cycle – agriculture, thus, weather.

The key point for analysts is that the dynamics take time. Sudden collapses appear to occur, but in fact it is the end stage that seems sudden. This is an iron law of instability analysis. Similarly, surprise attacks take longer to prepare than open war preparations. The fact of suddenness is a measurement of the effect on or expectations of the observer or the victims. Sudden system collapses may occur because of earthquakes, but not the instrumentality of opposition groups.

The other iron law of instability analysis is that leaders in the government and the opposition need time to assess the effects of their measures. The essence of crisis management for both is damage limitation, restoration of control and restoration of a new order. These cannot be done under chaotic conditions, which do not last as a result. If an analysts believes that chaos is enduring, as in Somalia in the mid 1990s, that usually signifies a faulty mental concept of what he is observing. System change has occurred, but the analyst has not defined how.

How long can this go on. As not in Poland, six 90-day cycles preceded the imposition of martial law. In Russia, the final events leading to Yeltsin's assumptions of power took

place in four 90-day cycles. In Algeria, two 90 day cycles preceded the overthrow of Benjedid. This bought the Army 30 90-dayt cycles in which to strengthen the regime against Islamic fundamentalists. The regime is still in power – collapse is not inevitable and sometimes force is the correct or only feasible solution that works.

East German communism collapsed in 12 months in the final phase. Russian communism took six years to collapse from Gorbachev's reforms in 1985 until his ouster in August 1991.

What to look for at the start

Analysts must be sensitive to significant events that start a cycle of instability. Usually the start is marked by some singular event or nation-shaking change. Actions to implement IMF directives are often the beginning of an upheaval cycle. In some countries, the measures associated with the start of a new national economic plan are key. In others, it may be the death of a national leader. Always some event will constitute the measuring time.

Look on the periphery, the out of the way areas of the geography and the out of the way people who have no role in the existing order.

The Influence of Learning

Leaders learn from their own successes and the successes and failures of others. The failures of other states is a good guide for avoiding misdirected actions, but not for selecting things to do. The learning process complicates the analysis in several ways. It prevents the natural evolution of an unstable system. It introduces foreign variable that are difficult to value. It may prolong the inevitable while camouflaging the true state of instability.

To illustrate, a state that is unable to feed itself may choose to invite foreign food donations without undertaking fundamental reforms to make itself self sufficient. North Korea has pursued this policy to stave off insurrection and hard choices to reform. The system is vulnerable from within and unstable, but it manipulates outside influences to help keep it in power and block the natural evolution of instability that should result in government overthrow.